



A BRIEF HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CLAIM THAT, "CHRISTIANITY IS A EUROPEAN OR WESTERN RELIGION THAT WAS FORCED ON AFRICANS

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ABSTRACT

Christianity is authentically an African religion. History clearly attests to this truth by providing the following facts: first, it is on record that Christianity had been on African continent or its parts long before it came to the Western world. Africa had a close relation with Israel prior to the Christian era as it housed a lot of Israel's Diaspora. History of Christianity on the African continent goes back to the first century. The Gospel has it that Simon of Cyrene carried the Cross of Jesus. Moreover, on the Day of Pentecost, Africans were among the visitors who had come in Jerusalem. In addition, there is a tradition that attributes the founding of Christianity at Alexandria to John Mark. Second, the astounding stories of Africans initiatives in the spread of the Gospel to the fellow Africans. Africans went out with Gospel to reach out to their fellow Africans with immeasurable success. These stories would be a folly if Christianity were a Western civilization for Africans could not effectively westernize fellow Africans. Thirdly, the success stories of Christianity in Africa. A part from numerical growth, Christianity has been on the forefront in initiating and ensuring national development in Africa. It has pursued this through providing education, agitating for justice and providing moral fiber to the national leadership. Finally, Africa shaped Christian mind in its formative stage by conceptualizing and developing of the idea of a university, exegesis, Christian doctrines, conciliar process, monasteries, Christian neo-Platonism, and rhetorical and dialectical skills took place. All these historical facts point to the truth that Christianity is an authentic African religion and not a Western civilization.

Key Words: Christianity, civilization, African Continent, Western cultural imperialism

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is authentically an African religion. It is not a European or Western religion forced upon Africans by colonialists as a form of cultural imperialism as others would want us to perceive. This paper is an essay that seeks to refute the notion that Christianity is a European or Western religion forced upon Africans by colonialism as a form of cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, what does it mean that Christianity is an African religion? Pobee and Gabriel clearly articulate this concept as follows:

The concept of "African" Christianity does not mean that there is a version of Christianity that is African, any more than that there is European Christianity. Christ as the Truth and the Way, belongs to all ages and all climes. There is an eternal element that cannot be nationalized or regionalized: yet Christianity enjoins away of life to be lived in society, and this must find expression in human relations and institutions.¹

Consequently, it suffices to say that Christianity in Africa is equally authentic as elsewhere in the world where God is at work to save men and women by his grace. History attests to this fact. Five reasons in the history of Christianity support this assertion. First, Christianity flourished in Africa long before it laid hold of Europe. Second, a great story is told of Africans' initiative in establishment and nurturance of African Christianity. Third, success stories told of Christianity in Africa. Fourth, the contribution Africa has made in shaping the Christian mind. And finally, the existence of a unique type of Christianity bred in Africa.

To build up this case, evidences are drawn from the history of Christianity on the continent. It is my sincere hope that this exercise would be a step into the direction of critical historical inquisition with a view of not only affirming African Christian identity but also seeking to contribute into the quest for African Christian orthodoxy.

ARRIVAL AND ESTABLISHMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

Africa has had close ties with the nations in the east due to proximity. People from eastern nations and those from Africa interacted in various ways, which made them share many experiences. They were at times friends, refuges, partners, neighbors, slaves, foes or snares to one another.² Stories are told of settlement,³ immigration, and movement of the Hebrews into and out of Egypt (cf. Gen. 12; 13; 21; 37:25-36; 39 and 40; 42 and 46; Ex. 12:31ff and Matt 2:13-14, 19-20). It therefore suffices to say that Africa, especially Egypt, has had a long relation with and even been part of the Ancient Near East civilization.⁴

There are varied traditions as to how Christianity came to Africa. However, it is acceptable that Christianity arrived on the African continent during the apostolic era by means of the Hellenistic Jews who had encountered the truth of the gospel. Sundkler and Christopher see a link between the beginnings of Christianity in the Nile Delta with "the life of the Jewish Diaspora on the Mediterranean coastline."⁵ Another tradition endeared by the church in Egypt credits the work to the ministry of St. Mark. This tradition is lacking as far as documentation is concern and so Prof. Morad⁶ feels that there is no basis to credit or discredit it. Whatever the case, the New Testament is a wash of evidences of an earliest of African encounter with Christianity. Simon of Cyrene's carrying of the cross of Jesus, Egyptian and Cyrenaica's visitors' hearing of Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost, Ethiopian Eunuch's conversion, Cyrenaica's involvement in the Church in Antioch, and the teaching ministry of Apollo of Alexandria⁷ as recorded in the scripture puts Africa's reception of Christianity to as early as apostolic period.

It is clear from Oosthuizen that Christianity was established in Africa early but with shortcomings.

"In the early part of the fourth century Christianity was firmly rooted in North Africa. By the middle of the fifth century, Egypt was a Christian country. But the Church in North Africa had an inherent weakness - it was not truly African Church; its membership were from the Roman and Greek middle classes, the colonialists, who lived apart from the indigenous people"⁸

¹ John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II. *African Initiatives in Christianity: The growth, gifts and diversities of indigenous African Churches a challenge to the ecumenical movement*. (Geneva: WCC, 1998), p. 11. The authors cited K. A. Busia.

² Stephen Morad, "African Church History" (lecture, NEGST, Nairobi, May 8, 2009), pp. 1-2. Here Morad elaborates on specific ways through which Africa got involved with Israel as documented in the Bible.

³ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History* 2nd Revised ed. (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), p. 21. This author talks of Jewish settlements in Egypt between 50-100 Common Era.

⁴ Morad, p. 2

⁵ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead. *A History of the Church in Africa*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), p.8

⁶ Morad, Class discussion, May 8, 2009.

⁷ See Morad, p. 2 for particular scriptural references.

⁸ G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa: A Theological and Anthropological Study*. (C. Hurst & CO. 1968), p.1. Cited Westermann (1937) and Groves (1948).

A claim that Thomas C. Oden downplays by pausing a critical question of Africa's identity. This question is concerned with the qualification to be met for one to be considered an African. Thomas feels that one's locality of upbringing and sphere of influence should be the criteria.⁹ He thus qualifies those who formed up the church of Africa at this period as Africans despite their racial or ethnic background. However, the point here is that Christianity reached and flourished on the African soil long before it was in Europe and other Western nations¹⁰. Pobe and Gabriel underscore this fact clearly by noting that,

As a matter of fact, Christianity came to Upper Egypt and Sudan between Aswan and Khartoum in the first century (cf. Acts 8:26-20). That church molded the fortunes of Christianity for nearly a thousand years through its monks, its martyrs and its renowned catechetical school of high learning at Alexandria, presided over by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215). The lively and constructive theological activity there is exemplified by the presence of the Gnostics, who propagated esoteric teachings in the second century, and the Arians, whose teachings was to be declared heretical.¹¹

AFRICANS INITIATIVE IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

African Christianity is a story of the native catechists and evangelists who have remained anonymous while others mention in passing.¹² A case in point is Prophet William Harris Wade who single-handedly almost Christianized the entire coastal part of Ivory Coast in a matter months.¹³ Much documentation is available detailing the Afro-American Movement in Liberia that spearheaded the work of reaching their fellow Africans with the Gospel.¹⁴ Another indicator to the African involvement in Christianizing its natives is the story of the Ghanaian Methodism through which the nationals took the lead.¹⁵ Space does not permit to divulge Ugandans labor.¹⁶

Owing to the rapid establishment and growth of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Africa¹⁷, it would be a sheer prejudice not to appreciate the Africans initiative in Christianizing their own continent. There are great stories of the rapid growth of African Initiated churches. Churches like the Church of the Lord (Aladura), the Church of Christ in Africa (Hera), the Harrist, the Zion Christian Church, African Apostles, AmaNazaretha, Lumpa Church, the Kimbanguist Church and the Holy Spirit Church of East Africa have experienced tremendous growth. Based on such growth it is therefore befitting to conclude that Christianity is an African religion and not as others would have it as a Western civilization.

SUCCESS STORIES IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Africa, characteristically, has had a success story of Christianity to not warrant such a notion as being a Western religion, leave alone Western imperialism. Such indicators, though not without challenges, point to Christianity as authentically an African religion. These indicators include the ability of Christianity to speak effectively to African paganism, astounding numerical growth, success in indigenization of Christianity and nationalization of missionary founded churches.

The fact that "Christianity could speak to the condition of the African pagan without an elaborate preparation"¹⁸ tells volumes about its proximity to African heart. If Christianity were a Western religion, it would require a lot of preparation and translation in order to address the deep-seated African 'paganism'. However, as demonstrated through history many Africans embraced Christianity and renounced their previous 'fetish' and 'pagan' traditions that they had hitherto endeared.¹⁹ This is no mean indicator as to how Christianity as a world religion is authentically an African religion. Its ability to speak legibly and to

⁹ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind. Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2007), p. 69.

¹⁰ This assertion does not intend in any way to water down the Western involvement in the spread of the Gospel in Africa, especially the sub-Saharan. This was undertaken sometimes as a partnership with Africa requesting for assistance from the West and other times as a Western initiative (cf. Baur, pp. 43-44, 56, 86ff).

¹¹ Pobe and Gabriel, p. 14.

¹² Pobe and Gabriel, p. 26

¹³ Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast: The Prophet Harris and the Harrist Church* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 12.

¹⁴ See Baur, pp. 113-114.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁶ A classical work on the initiative of the Ugandans in the spread of the gospel and church planting has been done by M. Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: The Spread of Christianity in Uganda 1891-1914* (London: Rex Collings, 1978).

¹⁷ Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2001) gives an extensive treatment of the AICs.

¹⁸ Roland Oliver, *How Christian is Africa?* (The Highway: London, 1956), p. 12.

¹⁹ George Bond *et al.* eds., *African Christianity: Patterns of Religious Continuity* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; San Francisco: Academic Press, 1979), p. 12. See also Walker, p. 16.

counter the native African cultures sets Christianity on a different plane with the so-called Western civilization. This is because to this date Western civilization has remained foreign to Africans. Western civilization has never succeeded in shaping while authenticating the African identity the way Christianity has done.²⁰

Extensive studies conducted on the trends of Christianity today reveal that Christianity is astoundingly growing in the Southern hemisphere. Current trends show unprecedented growth of Christianity in Africa in the entirety of its history.²¹ Africans are accepting the Christian faith by masses. They are doing this intelligently and voluntarily without coercion.²² These conversions are not without a basis. Testimonies by those whose lives have been greatly transformed by the Gospel serve as strong baits that lure the masses into embracing Christianity. This would not be the case if Christianity were a Western civilization.

'Africanization' of the Christian faith is another success story of African Christianity. Christian faith came to Africa in different times and by different media. However, the astounding reality is the way African Christianity stands unique both in theology and in expression. This is overtly evident in the formation of churches referred to as African Initiated Churches (AICs) and the New Religious Movements (NEREMOS).²³ These religious movements explain and interpret the scripture to meet the immediate and felt socio-economic challenges²⁴ with the agency they deserve. Its adherents are trained to perceive Christian faith as the power to trounce dominions that stand in their way of experiencing abundant life. This implies that the church becomes the dispenser of answers to the adherents "needs like sickness, poverty, hunger, oppression, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits, and sorcery."²⁵ As a result, African Christianity is perceived to be the manufacturer and leading consumer of the "prosperity gospel". Similarly, both the African Initiated Churches and the New Religious Movements display a unique worship that is an expression of Christian faith in the African culture. The songs, dance, instruments and the entire liturgy depict a unique breed of Christianity that is authentically African.

On the brighter note, African Christians both from the mainline and AICs have faithfully labored to express their newly found Christian faith legibly. Subsequently, the biblically and contextually sound Christian theology emerging from African Christianity adds its voice to the hitherto missing voice in the World Christianity. Such works by African scholars like John Mbiti, J.N.K. Mugambi, Jose Chipenda, Zablon Nthamburi, Tite Tienou, Tokunboh Adeyemo and the late Kwame Bendiako just but to name a few, are greatly indispensable. A consolidated effort in the study and development of the much-awaited African biblical and theological scholarship that was undertaken by African theologians is the production of the African Bible Commentary. However, some theological work to the level of Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz's *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Pauline, 2000) is still awaited. The very reflection of the need for an African Christian theology in the arena of Christian theological reflection is a testimony as to the fact that Christianity is authentically African religion and not a Western civilization forced upon Africans.

Success in the nationalization of the missionary founded churches profoundly points to authenticity of Christianity as an African religion and not a Western civilization. As African countries gained political independence from their hitherto Western masters, which provided that they take on leadership of their institutions, the church became inherently one such institutions. Consequently, Africans took over the church in Africa and they have 'successfully' run it to date. Moreover, it is during their tenure as church leaders that we hear stories of unprecedented numerical growth on the continent. If Christianity were a Western civilization, how could an African successfully manage it? Therefore, the success story of

²⁰ See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. (New York: Orbis, 1989). Sanneh argues in this book that translation of scriptures made Africans to question and even renounce Western overtones in the church and stigmatized African cultures.

²¹ See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 14 and 15. See also Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 274 & 277.

²² Morad strongly argued for this position in his class lecture of 29th May 2009. André Karamaga, "The Christian Presence in Africa" in Jose B. Chipenda, André Karamaga, J.N.K. Mugambi and C.K. Omari (eds.), *The Church in Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1990), pp. 15-28 expounds on this fact in pages 24f under a subtopic "This Salvation Which Attracts Us."

²³ Aylward Shorter and Joseph N. Njiru, *New Religious Movements in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2001) is a classical documentation of such religious phenomenon in Africa.

²⁴ Anderson, pp. 220-224 gives a sophisticated treatment on AICs hermeneutical perspective which takes seriously both the centrality of the Bible and the African worldview.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 222

the nationalization of the missionary founded churches in Africa²⁶ is an indicator to the authenticity of Christianity as an African religion.

Finally, it is befitting to highlight the success story of the Christianity's contribution to national development in specific countries.²⁷ In Africa, stories are told of how the church (Christians) took center stage both in the struggle for independence and preparing Africans for leadership positions. Christianity has since not only become a public watchdog to the African governments offering the moral and spiritual guidance but also the intellectual tools for those who aspire to serve in the national development. Professor Nthamburi singles out provision of education in its wider spectrum, raising the red flag on occasions when law and order is violated, participation in constitution process and provision a moral check to the national leaders as ways through which the Christianity has continued to prophetically minister to the nations of Africa.²⁸

AFRICA SHAPED THE CHRISTIAN MIND²⁹

Africa shaped the Christian mind that blossomed in the articulations of its faith in the European medieval Christianity. It was in Africa that conception and development of the idea of a university, exegesis, Christian doctrines, conciliar process, monasteries, Christian neo-Platonism, and rhetorical and dialectical skills took place. The Alexandrian catechetical school became a prototype of the later development in the universities in Europe and the rest of the Western world. African theologians set pace for the later rigorous development of the Christian theology. An example of Origen will hereby suffice.

Origen's work laid the foundations for the scholarly analysis of Scripture and developed a coherent theology of the nature of God, revelation and salvation. By these efforts he sought to forge links extending the chain of apostolic teaching and example.³⁰

Furthermore, it is on record that African took lead in the discovery and fight of heresies. This demonstrates not only the eagerness but also discipline that Africans embraced in the making sense out the word of God way before it found its way to Europe. As Pobe and Gabriel underscores, "[t]he lively and constructive theological activity there is exemplified by the presence of Gnostics, who propagated esoteric teachings in the second century, and the Arians, whose teachings was to be declared heretical."³¹ All these attests to the fact that Christianity was first brooded and hatched in Africa long before it flowered in the Western world. With all these foundational contribution that Africa made to Christianity during its formative stages, it would only amount to sheer prejudice for one to conclude that Christianity is a Western civilization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Christianity is authentically an African religion. Throughout this paper, I have made a case for this fact. I have refuted the claim that Christianity is a Western civilization leveled on Africans by their colonial masters. History clearly attests to this truth by providing the following facts: first, it is on record that Christianity had been on African continent or its parts long before it came to the Western world. Africa had a close relation with Israel prior to the Christian era as it housed a lot of Israel's Diaspora. History of Christianity on the African continent goes back to the first century. The Gospel has it that Simon of Cyrene carried the Cross of Jesus. Moreover, on the Day of Pentecost, Africans were among the visitors who had come in Jerusalem. In addition, there is a tradition that attributes the founding of Christianity at Alexandria to John Mark.

Second, the astounding stories of Africans initiatives in the spread of the Gospel to the fellow Africans. Africans went out with Gospel to reach out to their fellow Africans with immeasurable success. These stories would be a folly if Christianity were a Western civilization for Africans could not effectively

²⁶ Zablon Nthamburi, "The Beginning and Development of Christianity in Kenya: A General Survey" in Zablon Nthamburi (ed.) From Mission to Church: A Handbook of Christianity in East Africa (Nairobi: Uzima1991), pp. 1-36. In this article, Prof. Nthamburi discusses nationalization of the church in Kenya under a subtopic 'From Mission to Church' on pages 24-26.

²⁷ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998) surveys the role Christianity played in shaping the civil society in Africa. He notes the critical part it played in the development in specific countries in the continent prior to and the immediate period following independence. He, however, decries the contemporary context fostered by Christianity. He notes that African Christianity currently lack in fostering ambition, sobriety, goals, application and education, and support for those struggling. However, Henry Okullu, *Church and State in National Building and Human Development* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1984) is a classical reflection on how Christianity in Africa remained focused on its course of participating in national development.

²⁸ Nthamburi, pp. 28-30.

²⁹ Thomas C. Oden extensively argues for this idea in his book entitled *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind. Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2007).

³⁰ Pobe and Gabriel, pp. 14 -15

³¹ Ibid, p. 14

westernize fellow Africans. Thirdly, the success stories of Christianity in Africa. A part from numerical growth, Christianity has been on the forefront in initiating and ensuring national development in Africa. It has pursued this through providing education, agitating for justice and providing moral fiber to the national leadership. Finally, Africa shaped Christian mind in its formative stage by conceptualizing and developing of the idea of a university, exegesis, Christian doctrines, conciliar process, monasteries, Christian neo-Platonism, and rhetorical and dialectical skills took place. All these historical facts point to the truth that Christianity is an authentic African religion and not a Western civilization.

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